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PORTRAIT OF A LADY

BY GAMALIEL BRADFORD, JR.

LADY MARY WORTLEY MONTAGU (born Pierrepont) wrote poems, essays, and translations of some note in her own day, of none in ours. She also wrote letters which can never die, letters less charming, indeed, than Madame de Sévigné's because the writer was less charming, but full of light on the first half of the eighteenth century and also on Lady Mary herself. I do not refer so much to the celebrated letters from Constantinople, because those were probably arranged and edited for literary purposes, but to the general correspondence, which throbs and vibrates and sparkles like a live thing.

The writer knew quite well what she was doing. Speaking of Madame de Sévigné's productions, she says: "Mine will be full as entertaining forty years hence." And, perhaps with a touch of jealousy not wholly uncharacteristic, she depreciates her French predecessor, "who only gives us, in a lively manner and fashionable phrases, mean sentiments, vulgar prejudices, and endless repetitions. Sometimes the tittle-tattle of a fine lady, sometimes the tittle-tattle of an old nurse, always tittle-tattle."

Those who find the divine tittle-tattle of *Notre Dame des Rochers* not only among the liveliest, but among the most human and even the wisest things in literature, will not be the less ready to appreciate Lady Mary, who has her own tittle-tattle as well as her own wisdom and liveliness. How easy she is, how ready, and how graceful! Her letters, she says, are "written with rapidity and sent without reading over." This may be true and may not. At any rate, they have at their best the freshness of first thoughts, the careless brilliancy of a high-bred, keen-witted woman talking in her own parlor, indifferent to effect, yet naturally elegant in her speech as in her dress and motion.

With what vivacity she touches everything and everybody about her, "a certain sprightly folly that (I thank God) I was born with" she calls it, but it is only folly in the sense of making dull things gay and sad things tolerable. See how she finds laughter in the imminence of sea peril: An ancient English lady "had bought a fine point head, which she was contriving to conceal from the custom-house officers. When the wind grew high and our little vessel cracked, she fell heartily to her prayers and thought wholly of her soul. When it seemed to abate, she returned to the worldly care of her head-dress and addressed herself to me: 'Dear madam, will you take care of this point? If it should be lost!—Ah, Lord, we shall all be lost!—Lord have mercy on my soul!—Pray, madam, take care of this head-dress.' This easy transition from her soul to her head-dress, and the alternate agonies that both gave her, made it hard to determine which she thought of greatest value."

In the constant imminence of life's world perils Lady Mary had still by her this resource of merriment, which some call flippancy, but which by any name is not without its comforts.

True, such a glib tongue or pen is a dangerous plaything and liable to abuse. Lady Mary's own daughter said that her mother was too apt to set down people of a meek and gentle character for fools. People of any character, perhaps, whenever the wayward fancy struck her. She darted her shafts right and left. They stung and they clung, for they were barbed, if not poisoned. Sometimes they made near friends as cold as strangers. Too often they turned indifferent strangers into enemies. Enemies, too many, Lady Mary had all her life, and they seized on her weak points and amplified or invented ugly things about her till those who admire her most find defense somewhat difficult.

Yet she did not gloat over evil. "'Tis always a mortification to me to observe there is no perfection in humanity." Her unkindness was far more on her tongue than in her heart. "This I know, that revenge has so few joys for me I shall never lose so much time as to undertake it." She had the keenest sense of human sorrow and suffering: "I think nothing so terrible as objects of misery, except one had the God-like attribute of being able to redress them." What she could do to redress them she did. By her efforts

to introduce inoculation for smallpox she surely proved herself one of the greatest benefactors of humanity. In many smaller things also she was kindly and sympathetic. And what pleases me most is that she makes little mention of such deeds herself. One is left to divine them from curt, half-sarcastic remarks in other connections. Thus, during her long residence in Italy, it appears that she ministered to her neighbors both in body and in soul. "I do what good I am able in the village round me, which is a very large one; and have had so much success that I am thought a great physician and should be esteemed a saint if I went to mass." Later she had much ado to keep the people from erecting a statue to her. But she shrank from love in Italy which was sure to breed laughter in England.

Also, even in her bursts of ill nature, she had a certain reserve, a certain control, a certain sobriety. Indeed, she compliments herself in old age on her freedom from petulance. "To say truth, I think myself an uncommon kind of creature, being an old woman without superstition, peevishness, or censoriousness." This is, perhaps, more than we could say for her. But in youth and age both she loved moderation and shunned excess. When she was twenty-three she wrote, "I would throw off all partiality and passion and be calm in my opinion." She threw them off too much, she was too calm, she was cold. Walpole called her letters too womanish, but Lady Craven thought they must have been written by a man. Most readers will agree with Lady Craven. Even her vivacity lacks warmth. And it is here that she most falls short of the golden sunshine of Madame de Sévigné. Lady Mary is not quite the woman even in her malice. Through her wit, through her thought, through her comment on life, even through her human relations runs a strain of something that was masculine.

Nowhere is this more curious and amusing than in her love and marriage. She was beautiful and knew it, though the smallpox, by depriving her of eyelashes, had given a certain staring boldness to her eyes. When she was over thirty she "led up a ball" and "believed in her conscience she made one of the best figures there." When she was old, for all her philosophy, she did not look in a glass for eleven years. "The last reflection I saw there was so disagreeable I resolved to spare myself such mortifications in the future."

She fed her youthful fancy with the vast fictions then in fashion, and the result was a romantic head and a cool heart. These appear alternately in her strange correspondence with her lover and future husband, Mr. Wortley Montagu. When they first met the gentleman admired her learning—at fourteen! And Latinity seems to have drawn them together quite as much as love. There was a sister, Miss Anne Wortley, and sisters are of great use on such occasions. Lady Mary wrote to her in language of extravagant regard and Miss Wortley wrote back—at her brother's dictation. Then it became obviously simpler for the lovers to write direct.

Obstacles arose. Mr. Wortley Montagu would make no settlement on his wife. Lady Mary's father would not hear of a marriage without one and hunted up another suitor, rich—and unacceptable. There was doubt, debate, delay—and then an elopement. Lady Mary eloping! What elements of comedy! And her letters make it so.

That she loved her lover as much as she could love is evident. "My protestations of friendship are not like other people's; I never speak but what I mean, and when I say I love 'tis forever." "I am willing to abandon all conversation but yours. If you please I will never see another man. In short, I will part with anything for you but you. I will not have you a month to lose you for the rest of my life." "I would die to be secure of your heart, though but for a moment."

Yet the apparent passion is tempered with doubt and reversal. She cannot make him happy, nor he her. "I can esteem, I can be a friend, but I don't know whether I can love." "You would soon be tired with seeing every day the same thing." No, it is all folly. Cancel it, break it up, throw it over. Begin again a new life, a new world. She will write to him no more. "I resolve against all correspondence of the kind. My resolutions are seldom made and never broken."

This one is broken in a few days. Again she loves, again she hopes. Everything shall be right so far as it lies with her. "If my opinion could sway, nothing should displease you. Nobody ever was so disinterested as I am." And yet once more cold analysis twitches her sleeve, murmurs in her ear: "You are the first I ever had a correspondence with, and I thank God I have done with it for all my life."

When I have no more to say to you, you will like me no longer."

Then she blows the doubts away, makes her stolen marriage, gives all to love, and in the very doing of it lets fall one phrase that shows the doubter more than ever (*italics mine*): "I foresee all that will happen on this occasion. I shall incense my family in the highest degree. The generality of the world will blame my conduct, . . . yet *'tis possible* you may recompense everything to me." How two little words will show a heart!

And afterward? She fared pretty much as she expected. Love hardened into marriage with some, not unusual, hours of agony. "I cannot forbear telling you, I think you have used me very unkindly." When he fails to write to her she cries for two hours. Then all becomes domestic and decorous, and as it should be; and her matured opinion of marriage agrees very well with the previsions of her youth. "Where are people matched?—I suppose we shall all come right in Heaven; as in a country dance, the hands are strangely given and taken, while they are in motion, at last all meet their partners when the jig is done."

Perhaps because she showed no great conjugal affection, there was plenty of gossip about affections less legitimate. Pope lavished rhetorical devotion on her. She laughed at it and, I fear, at him. In consequence he lampooned her with the savage spite of an eighteenth-century poet. She said unkind things about Sir Robert Walpole, and Sir Robert's son said unkind things about her, mentioned some lovers by name, and implied many others. Lady Mary's careful editors have dealt with these slanders most painstakingly; and though in one case, that of an Italian adventurer, they have overlooked a passage in Sir Horace Mann's letters, oddly confirmatory of Walpole, I think they have cleared their heroine with entire success.

After all, Lady Mary's best defense against scandal is her own temperament and her own words. It is true, those who have lived a wild life are often the first to exclaim against it. But in this case the language bears every impress of being prompted by observation rather than experience. She says of the notorious Lady Vane: "I think there is no rational creature that would not prefer the life of the strictest Carmelite to the round of hurry and misfortune she has gone through."

Lady Mary's long sojourn in Italy toward the close of her career did much to increase suspicion in regard to her relations with her husband. Her greatest admirers have not been able to explain clearly why she wished to exile herself in such a fashion. But the tone in which during the whole period she writes both to Mr. Wortley Montagu and of him is absolutely incompatible with any serious coldness between them. "My most fervent wishes are for your health and happiness." And again: "I have never heard from her [her daughter] since, nor from any other person in England, which gives me the greatest uneasiness; but the most sensible part of it is in regard of your health, which is truly and sincerely the dearest concern I have in this world."

Lady Mary had two children, and as a mother she is very much what she is as a wife, sensible, prudent, devoted, but neither clinging nor adoring. She had, indeed, a happy art of expressing maternal tenderness, as of expressing everything, by which I do not imply that her feelings were not sincere, but simply that they were not very vital or very overwhelming. When she sets out on her travels she is heartbroken over the perils and exposures for her son. "I have long learnt to hold myself at nothing; but when I think of the fatigue my poor infant must suffer, I have all a mother's fondness in my eyes and all her tender passions in my heart." But her language about this same son when grown to manhood is somewhat astounding. He was a most extraordinary black sheep, wasted money, contracted debts, gambled, liked evil occupations and worse company, varied a multiplicity of wives with a multiplicity of religions, was once in jail, and never respectable. All this Lady Mary deplures, but she is not heartbroken over it; on the contrary, she analyzes his character to his father with singular cold soberness. "It is very disagreeable to me to converse with one from whom I do not expect to hear a word of truth and who, I am sure, will repeat many things that never passed in our conversation." Or more generally, "I suppose you are now convinced I have never been mistaken in his character; which remains unchanged, and, what is yet worse, I think is unchangeable. I never saw such a complication of folly and falsity as in his letter to Mr. G——."

Her daughter, Lady Bute, she was fond of. "Your happiness," she writes to her, "was my first wish, and the

pursuit of all my action divested of all self-interest." Nevertheless, she lived contentedly without seeing her for twenty years.

That Lady Mary was a good domestic manager hardly admits of doubt; but I find no evidence that she enjoyed feminine occupations, though she does somewhere remark that she considers certain types of learned ladies "much inferior to the plain sense of a cook maid who can make a good pudding and keep the kitchen in good order." Among her numerous benefactions in Italy was the teaching of her neighbors how to make both bread and butter.

It is said that her servants loved her, not unnaturally, if she carried out her own maxim: "The small proportion of authority that has fallen to my share (only over a few children and servants) has always been a burden, and I believe every one finds it so who acts from a maxim that whoever is under my power is under my protection." She was a born aristocrat, however, both socially and politically, and any leveling tendencies that she may have cherished in her ardor of youth vanished entirely with years and experience. "Was it possible for me to elevate anybody from the station in which they were born, I would not do it. Perhaps it is a rebellion against that Providence that has placed them; all we ought to do is to endeavor to make them easy in the rank assigned them." And elsewhere, in a much more elaborate passage, she expresses herself with a deliberate haughtiness of rank and privilege which has rarely been surpassed. In her youth, she says, silly prejudice taught her that she was to treat no one as an inferior. But she has learned better and come to see that such a notion made her "admit many familiar acquaintances, of which I have heartily repented every one, and the greatest examples I have known of honor and integrity have been among those of the highest birth and fortunes." The English tendency to mingle classes and level distinctions will, she believes, have some day fatal consequences. How curious, in so keen a wit, the failure to foresee that just this English social elasticity would avert the terrible disaster which was to befall the nice gradations of French order and system!

Lady Mary was not only practical in her household, but in all the other common concerns of life. Rarely has a woman pushed her husband on in the world with more vigor-

ous energy than is shown in the letters she writes to Mr. Wortley Montagu, urging him to drop his diffidence and claim what he deserves. "No modest man ever did, or ever will, make his fortune."

As regards money also she was eminently a woman of business—too eminently, say her enemies. One reason alleged for her quarrel with Pope is his well-meant advice which brought her large losses in South Sea speculation. However much one may like and admire her, it is impossible wholly to explain away Walpole's picture of her sordid avarice, which cannot be omitted, though hideous. "Lady Mary Wortley is arrived; I have seen her; I think her avarice, her dirt, and her vivacity are all increased. Her dress, like her languages, is a *galimatias* of several countries; the groundwork rags, and the embroidery nastiness. She wears no cap, no handkerchief, no gown, no petticoat, no shoes. An old black-laced hood represents the first; the fur of a horseman's coat, which replaces the third, serves for the second; a dimity petticoat is deputy and officiates for the fourth; and slippers act the part of the last."

It is easy here to see the brush of hatred deepening the colors; but hatred can hardly have invented the whole. Yet all the references to money matters in Lady Mary's letters are sane and commendable. She hates poverty, and she hates extravagance as the road to poverty, and she cherishes thrift as the assurance of independence and comfort. That sort of lavish living which is certain to end in suffering for self and others she condemns bitterly. Will any one say she can condemn it too bitterly? "He lives upon rapine—I mean running in debt to poor people, who perhaps he will never be able to pay." But I do not find that she unduly prizes money for itself. We should seek riches, she says, but why? "As the world is and will be 'tis a sort of duty to be rich, that it may be in one's power to do good, riches being another word for power"; with which compare the remark of Gray, a man surely not liable to the charge of avarice: "It is a striking thing that one can't only not live as one pleases, but where and with whom one pleases, without money. Swift somewhere says that money is liberty; and I fear money is friendship, too, and society and almost every external blessing. It is a great, though ill-natured, comfort to see most of those who have it in plenty, without pleasure, without liberty, and without friends."

Nevertheless, it must be admitted that in these questions of conduct Lady Mary does not err on the side of enthusiasm. In a long and curious passage she enlarges on the virtues of her favorite model—Atticus, the typical trimmer and opportunist, who lived in one of the greatest crises of the world and weathered it safe and rich, who had many friends and served many and betrayed none, but did not think any cause good enough to die for.

As regards social life and general human relations, it is very much the same. Lady Mary had vast acquaintance. I do not find that she had many friends either dear or intimate. Of Lady Oxford she does, indeed, always speak with deep affection. And she says of herself, no doubt truly: "I have a constancy in my nature that makes me always remember my old friends." Also her love of a snapping exchange of wit made her appreciate conversation. "You know I have ever been of opinion that a chosen conversation, composed of a few that one esteems, is the greatest happiness of life." Yet she was too full of resources to need people, too critical to love people, too little sympathetic to pity people. And in one of the lightning sentences of self-revelation she shows a temperament not perfectly endowed by Heaven for friendship: "I manage my [two] friends with such a strong yet with a gentle hand that they are both willing to do whatever I have a mind to."

But if she did not love mankind she found them endlessly amusing, a perpetual food for observation and curiosity. And the wandering life she led nourished this taste to the fullest degree. "It was a violent transition from your palace and company to be locked up all day with my chambermaid and sleep at night in a hovel; but my whole life has been in the Pindaric style." It is this love of diversity, this keen sense of the human in all its phases, which give zest to her Turkish letters and the record of wanderings and hardships which might not now be encountered in a journey to the pole. But long wanderings and strange faces are not necessary for the naturalist of souls, who can find the ugliest weeds and tenderest flowers at his own front door. Lady Mary was never tired of studying souls, and thought highly of her own discernment in them. "I have seldom been mistaken in my first judgment of those I thought it worth while to consider." This confidence I am sorry to find in her, for I have always held it a good rule

that those who asserted their sure judgment of men knew little about them. True insight is more modest. At any rate, mistaken or not, she found the varied spectacle of human action endlessly diverting and again and again recurs to the charm of it: "I endeavor upon this occasion to do as I have hitherto done in all the odd turns of my life; turn them, if I can, to my diversion." "I own I enjoy vast delight in the folly of mankind; and, God be praised, that is an inexhaustible source of enjoyment."

But, though she could always amuse herself with men and women, she could also amuse herself without them and needed neither courtship nor cards nor gossip to keep her heart at ease. It is true that in youth she knew youth's restlessness and that haunting dread, chronic to some souls, which fills one day with anxiety as to what may fill the next. To Mrs. Hewet she writes: "Be so good as never to read a letter of mine but in one of those minutes when you are entirely alone, weary of everything, and *inquiète* to think of what you shall do next. All people who live in the country must have some of those minutes." But time soothes this and makes the present seem so inadequate that the poor shreds of life remaining can never quite eke it out. "I have now lived almost seven years in a stricter retirement than yours in the Isle of Bute, and can assure you I have never had half an hour heavy on my hands for want of something to do."

Her country life did not, indeed, include much ecstasy over the natural world. She was born too early for Rousseau, and it is doubtful whether high romance could ever have seriously appealed to her. She finds Venice a gay social center. Of its poetry, its mystery, its moonlight never a word. Perhaps these did not exist before Byron. On the Alps and their sublimity she has as delightful a phrase as the whole eighteenth century can furnish (*italics mine*): "The prodigious prospect of mountains covered with eternal snow, clouds hanging far below our feet, and the vast cascades tumbling down the rocks with a confused roaring, would have been *solemnly entertaining* to me if I had suffered less from the extreme cold that reigns here." If that is not Salvator Rosa in little, what is? I know few things better, unless it be Ovid's "*Nile jocose*," gamesome Nile.

No. Lady Mary's nature, like that of most of her contemporaries, was an artful invention of trim lawns, boxed

walks, shady alleys with a statue at the end, or a ruined temple on a turfy hill. Such gardens she liked well enough to stroll in, but the garden that charmed her most was the garden of her soul. "Whoever will cultivate their own mind will find full employment. Every virtue does not only require great care in the planting, but as much daily solicitude in cherishing as exotic fruits and flowers." "Add to this the search after knowledge (every branch of which is entertaining) and the longest life is too short for the pursuit of it."

In that pursuit she never tired from early youth to her last years. Indeed, among her contemporaries she had the reputation of a learning as masculine as some of her other tastes and habits. In this rumor probably exaggerated, as usual. She herself, in her many interesting references to her education, disclaims anything of the sort. She was a bright child, with a passion for reading. She learned Latin, French, and Italian, and used them, but rather as a reader than as a scholar. Systematic intellectual training she could hardly have had or desired, merely that passionate delight in the things of the mind which is the greatest blessing a human being can inherit. "If," she says of her granddaughter, "she has the same inclination (I should say passion) for learning that I was born with, history, geography, and philosophy will furnish her materials to pass away cheerfully a longer life than is allotted to mortals."

She had, however, little disposition to brag of her acquirements. On the contrary, it is singular with what insistence, bitterness almost, she urges that a woman should never, never allow herself to be thought wiser or more studious than her kind. Read if you please, think if you please, but keep it to yourself. Otherwise women will laugh at you and men avoid you. "I never studied anything in my life and have always (at least from fifteen) thought the reputation of learning a misfortune to a woman." And again of her granddaughter, with a sharp tang that hints at many sad experiences: "The second caution to be given her is to conceal whatever learning she attains with as much solicitude as she would hide crookedness or lameness; the parade of it can only serve to draw on her the envy, and consequently the most inveterate hatred, of all he and she fools, which will certainly be at least three parts in four of all her acquaintance."

It is in this spirit that Lady Mary speaks very slightly of her own poems and other writings. For us they are chiefly significant as emphasizing, in their coarseness and in some other peculiarities, that masculine strain which has been so apparent in many sides of her interesting personality.

As a critic she is more fruitful than as an author, and her remarks on contemporary writers have a singular vigor and independence. Johnson she recommends for the idle and ignorant. "Such gentle readers may be improved by a moral hint, which, though repeated over and over from generation to generation, they never heard in their lives." Fielding and Smollett she adores—again the man's taste, you see. On Clarissa she is charming. The man in her disapproves, derides. The woman weeps "like any milkmaid of sixteen over the ballad of the Lady's Fall." But weeping, laughing, or yawning, she reads, reads, reads. For she is a true lover of books. And she thus delightfully amplifies Montesquieu's delightful eulogy, *Je n'ai jamais eu de chagrin qu'une demi heure de lecture ne pouvait dissiper*: "I wish your daughters to resemble me in nothing but the love of reading, knowing by experience how far it is capable of softening the cruelest accidents of life; even the happiest cannot be passed over without many uneasy hours; and there is no remedy so easy as books, which, if they do not give cheerfulness, at least restore quiet to the most troubled mind. Those that fly to cards or company for relief generally find they only exchange one misfortune for another."

It is, then, already manifest that in the things of the spirit Lady Mary was as masculine and as stoical as in things of the flesh. In very early youth she translated Epictetus, and he stayed by her to the grave. Life has its vexations and many of them. People fret and torment till even her equanimity sometimes gives way. "I am sick with vexation." But in general she surmounts or forgets, now with an unpleasant, haughty fling of cynical scorn: "For my part, as it is my established opinion that this globe of ours is no better than a Holland cheese and the walkers about in it mites, I possess my mind in patience, let what will happen; and should feel tolerably easy, though a great rat came and ate half of it up"; now, as in her very last years, with a gentle reminiscence of her heroic teacher: "In this world much must be suffered, and we ought all to follow the rule of Epictetus, 'Bear and forbear.'"

As for nerves, vapors, melancholy, she has little experience of such feminine weakness and no patience with it. "Mutability of sublunary things is the only melancholy reflection I have to make on my own account." She seldom makes any other. "Strictly speaking, there is but one real evil—I mean, acute pain; all other complaints are so considerably diminished by time that it is plain the grief of it is owing to our passions, since the sensation of it vanishes when that is over." If by chance any little wrinkle shows itself, sigh from some unknown despair, winter shadow of old age and failing strength and falling friends, let us smooth it, strangle it, obliterate it by a book or a flower or a smile. In these matters habit is all.

And what was God in Lady Mary's life? Apparently little or nothing. As strangely little as in so many eighteenth-century lives. There is no rebellion, no passionate debate of hope and doubt; simply, as it seems, very little thought given to the subject. Religion is a useful thing—for the million, oh, an excellent thing, under any garb, in Turkey, in Italy, in England. Respect it? Yes. Cherish it? Yes. Believe it? The question is—well, an impertinent one. And if it be said that there may have been a feeling that some things were too sacred to be spoken about, let any one who can read Lady Mary's letters through and retain that idea cling to it for his comfort.

No, she lived like a gentlewoman; I had almost said like a gentleman, with a decent regard for the proprieties, a fundamental instinct of duty, a fair share of human charity, and an inexhaustible delight in the fleeting shows of time. And she died as she had lived. "Lady Mary Wortley, too, is departing," says Horace Walpole. "She brought over a cancer in her breast, which she concealed till about six weeks ago. It burst and there are no hopes of her. She behaves with great fortitude and says she has lived long enough."

Altogether, not a winning figure, but a solid one, who, with many oddities, treads earth firmly and makes life seem a little more respectable.

GAMALIEL BRADFORD, JR.